

You are an Expert: A Communicative Activity for Large Classes

By Annaliese Hausler-Akpovi

Motivating all your students to speak English in class can be a challenging task for any EFL teacher. In large classes this challenge often becomes overwhelming. Eager to encourage interaction in a class of over 80 freshman English students at the National University in Benin, I organized a communicative activity which achieved maximum participation and generated great student enthusiasm as well.

The goal of the interaction is reflected in its name, "You are an Expert." Selected students share information in small groups about how to do an activity that they know very well. Then, the students who have just been taught by a student "expert" get into new groups to share their newly acquired knowledge or skill with students in a new group. This interaction can be adapted to accommodate a variety of class sizes, age groups, language levels, and cultural settings.

Preparation

1. To prepare the activity, the teacher only needs small slips of paper or index cards so there is one for each student.
2. The teacher selects several culturally relevant topics with which his or her students will be familiar. For example, in my class of Beninese students I selected the following subjects: how to plant and grow cassava, how to make palm wine, how to plan a traditional dowry/wedding feast, how to wash and massage a baby, how to do a traditional dance, and how to make peanut-pepper sauce.
3. For each topic the teacher prepares six index cards with the name of the topic on one side and a number (1-6) on the other. For a class of 36 students, the teacher should have 36 cards organized into groups of six to correspond to each topic with a number 1-6 written on the reverse side.

Implementation

1. To organize the activity in the classroom, the teacher first explains that the students are all experts in different areas. The teacher suggests that according to the students' cultural heritage and milieu, each student has acquired significant knowledge of different skills, subjects, and processes which they can share with others.

2. Using the slips of paper prepared prior to class, the teacher asks students to volunteer if they feel they are experts in one of the various topic areas. The teacher then gives each volunteer expert a slip of paper on which his/her area of expertise is written.
3. The teacher asks these experts to stand and be recognized as group leaders, who will explain to the rest of the group how to do a specific activity.
4. The teacher explains that everyone will receive a piece of paper and learn about the activity that is written on that paper. The teacher indicates that the students must pay close attention to their leader's explanation, taking notes if they desire, so as to be able to clearly explain to others how to do what they have just learned. When the leader finishes her/his explanation, the members of the group should practice explaining the topic and process to each other before they share this information with a new group.
5. The teacher distributes all the papers and asks the students to find their respective groups according to the topic indicated. The teacher writes a time limit on the board for this part of the lesson (25 to 30 minutes).
6. As the experts are explaining their activity to the group, the teacher circulates around the room to assist and monitor their progress.
7. After the initial explanation phase is finished and each group has learned from an "expert," new groups are organized according to the number written on the back of each slip of paper. (All 1s get in one group; all 2s in another; etc.)
8. In the new groups each student will explain the steps involved in performing the activity that s/he has just learned. A time limit of 15 minutes is appropriate. Students may take notes if they wish. Again, the teacher should circulate around the room, listening, encouraging and observing the interaction.

Follow-up

Teachers can assign several follow-up activities to reinforce what the students have learned.

1. Have a student from each group describe the activity they have just been taught to the whole class.
2. Ask students to share their impressions of what they have learned, selecting and describing the newly acquired skill that is their favorite.
3. Give a quick comprehension quiz, asking specific questions about how to do certain activities.
4. Assign students a writing exercise in the form of a short essay about one of the activities they have just learned.

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